The Need for Competence

Lisa Legault
Clarkson University, Potsdam, NY, USA

Synonyms

Capability; Effectiveness; Mastery; Optimal challenge

Definition

Competence is the psychological need to exert a meaningful effect on one's environment. It refers to the innate propensity to develop skill and ability, and to experience effectance in action. Competence promotes the pursuit of challenging and deeply satisfying experiences and is a criterion for psychological growth and well-being.

Introduction

When people do not feel capable and effective, their motivation plummets and they suffer ill-being. Conversely, the experience of mastery leads to feelings of personal satisfaction, vitality, interest, and well-being (Deci and Ryan 2008). This fundamental connection between competence and human thriving suggests that it is a psychological prerequisite for growth and psychological health. Indeed, human beings have an inherent tendency to develop themselves. This means that they actively strive to become effective, to master their environments, and to hone their capacities in order to reach their innate potential (Deci and Ryan 2002; Harter 1983). This inborn need for competence appears to be universal – it is essential for individuals across cultures (e.g., Vlachopoulos et al. 2013). However, while the trajectory toward competence is innate, it cannot be assumed; rather, the attainment of competence requires feedback and support from the environment. When an event in the environment increases perceived competence (e.g., positive and informative feedback), interest and engagement will be enhanced; but when an event in the environment diminishes perceived competence (e.g., demeaning criticism), interest and engagement will be hindered.

Competence and Optimal Challenge

The need for competence fuels persistence, sustained effort and attention, and the determination to improve. It is the reason people generally prefer tasks that are challenging rather than boring or easy. In other words, the need for competence drives the desire to seek out optimal challenges. When people engage in optimally difficult and complex activities, their talents and skills are stimulated at a developmentally suitable level. This produces a deeply satisfying perception of

competence in the moment, which generates interest and energy for continued activity. When challenges and skills are perfectly matched, people experience a state of *flow* – a subjective experience of intense focus and concentration where action and awareness are fused, time is distorted, and a feeling of deep effectiveness and control over one's actions emerges (Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Such experiences often occur during "just-manageable" tasks – where challenges are neither too low nor too high, but rather *just equal to* skill-level.

Satisfying the Need for Competence

Given that optimally challenging experiences provide the conditions needed to experience perceived competence and flow, how can such experiences be cultivated? Because individuals are continuously and fundamentally involved in an ongoing exchange with their environment, their sense of perceived competence depends largely on the degree to which the social environment can provide competence-satisfying conditions. There are three important ways in which the social environment can help to facilitate perceived competence and flow: (1) providing structure and guidance, (2) relaying information and feedback, and (3) tolerating errors and failures (Reeve 2014).

Clear structure and detailed guidance provide people with skill-building assistance. Good structure involves goals that are clear, explicit, and understandable. Moreover, when instructions provide useful tips to improve and succeed (rather than directives that are confusing, ambiguous, or absent), people are more likely to feel competent.

Similarly, feedback is critical to competence and progress; without accurate and timely feedback, the effectiveness of action is impossible to discern. Feedback can be derived from the task itself – such as when fixing a computer (or not), or completing a crossword puzzle (or not). Alternately, feedback can come from personal comparisons to one's own past performances (e.g., either gaining or losing time on one's previous jogging pace); or from interpersonal comparisons with others (e.g., performing better or worse than others on a test). Regardless of the format, positive feedback generally indicates competence, whereas negative feedback signals incompetence. However, what is of utmost importance to satisfying the need for competence is useful and constructive information that will enable the development and elaboration of skills and capacities.

Finally, competence satisfaction is facilitated by situations and environments that offer the opportunity to make (and thus learn from) mistakes and failures. Optimally challenging tasks and situations *necessitate* the frequent occurrence of failure – it is only through these failures that talents and abilities can be improved. If individuals fear reprimand for errors and failures, they may avoid challenging and skill-building opportunities (Clifford 1990).

Conclusion

Competence is the perception of effectiveness in one's dynamic exchange with the social world. It also refers to the search for opportunities to exercise and develop one's capabilities (e.g., abilities, skills, effort capacity), that is, to experience optimal challenges. Rather than reflecting a static state of being competent or skillful at something, the need for competence is ongoing and promotes persistence and continued action.

Cross-References

▶ Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation
▶ Self-Determination Theory
▶ The Need for Autonomy

References

Clifford, M. M. (1990). Students need challenge, not easy success. *Educational Leadership, 48*, 22–26.
Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2002). *Handbook of self-determination research*. Rochester: University Rochester Press.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Self-determination theory: A macrotheory on human motivation, development, and health. *Canadian Psychology, 49*, 182–185.

Harter, S. (1983). Developmental perspectives on the self-system. In E. M. Hetherington (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology*, *Socialization, personality and social development* (Vol. 4, 4th ed., pp. 275–386). New York: Wiley.

Reeve, J. (2014). *Understanding motivation and emotion*. Hoboken: Wiley.

Vlachopoulos, S. P., Asci, F. H., Cid, L., Ersoz, G., González-Cutre, D., Moreno-Murcia, J. A., & Moutão, J. (2013). Cross-cultural invariance of the basic psychological needs in exercise scale and need satisfaction latent mean differences among Greek, Spanish, Portuguese and Turkish samples. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 14*, 622–631.